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AUTHOR Mitchell, Rosamond
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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to show that the relationship between current theoretical understanding of the origin and acquisition of language and the process of second language classroom instruction requires a basis in empirical research. Areas in which this research is needed include the importance of the teacher, especially in relation to "teacher talk," language proficiency, views of learning and teaching, and expectations of their students; classroom processes, including the use of first and second languages, simplification and repair strategies, and the relative commitment to receptive versus productive language use; and the learner's role, including students' views on learning, and developmental or process-product aspects of learning. (MSE)

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LANGUAGE LEARNING IN EDUCATION: WHAT RESEARCH SHOULD BE DONE TO HELP IMPROVE LEARNING?

ROSAMOND MITCHELL

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7. Language learning in education: what research should be done to help improve learning?

Rosamond Mitchell

INTRODUCTION

Other papers prepared for this conference consider needs for empirical research to support the further development of our theoretical understandings of the nature of linguistic competence, more especially of communicative competence, and of the psychological processes of L2 acquisition. This paper sets out to argue a related but somewhat different case: that attempts to apply current theoretical understandings of what language is, and how it is 'naturally' learned, to the process of L2 instruction in classrooms, also require the underpinning of empirical research.

Classrooms are complex social environments with their own role relationships and rules for behaviour; this makes the uptake of almost any innovation a problematic business. But because of their wide divergence from traditional goals and practices of L2 teaching in the British educational system, the adoption of 'communicative competence' as the goal of L2 teaching, and the acceptance of learning theories emphasising the importance of unconscious acquisition through active involvement in target language use, present a special challenge for the British L2 classroom. The appropriacy of goals deriving from linguistic theories to the ideologies, aspirations and competences of teachers and pupils: the feasibility in classroom settings of theory-derived instructional procedures: and the effectiveness of these procedures, in terms of their impact on pupil outcomes (attitudes and L2 attainment) - none can be taken for granted, and all merit research attention, in the quest to 'improve' classroom learning.

There has over the past few years been a significant positive response in Britain to current theoretical developments in sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, in terms of developmental initiatives in foreign language teaching and assessment. In spite of limited availability of resources, even for curriculum development, the 'grassroots' Graded Objectives in Modern Languages (GOML) movement has popularised new syllabuses and forms of assessment in many English local authority areas (Harding and others, 1980). The Scottish Central Committee on Modern Languages' French curriculum development project (now published as the Tour de France French course: Heinemann, 1981) and Lothian Region's Graded Levels of Achievement in Foreign Language Learning (GLAFLL) project (Clark, 1980), have popularised functional syllabuses and 'communicative'

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methodology at secondary level in Scotland. A recent CILT publication (Lunt, ed, 1982) documents additional developmental responses in higher education and in teacher education.

These developmental initiatives have, however, been supported only to a limited extent by concurrent classroom-based research and/or evaluation studies. The funding by the Scottish Education Department, alongside the Tour de France project, of associated research into methodology (Parkinson and others, 1981; Mitchell and others, 1981), and also of an evaluation study (Parkinson and others, 1982), remains exceptional. The now defunct Schools Council did fund some surveys and reviews of aspects of the GOML movement (Buckby and others, 1981; Harrison, 1982; Utley and others, 1983); certain examinations boards have also sponsored GOML-associated research (e.g. Dunning, ed, 1983). But the total funded research effort in relation to current innovation in foreign language (FL) teaching in schools has been small; overall, we still know very little about the uptake at classroom level of the various developmental initiatives. Other L2 areas in British schools have, however, fared rather worse. English as a second language (ESL) has received little research attention; and within the area of minority community language teaching, only Welsh has so far received anything approaching consistent funding for research as well as developmental purposes (see e.g. Price, 1978). (For a summary account of other funded initiatives in relation to community languages, see National Congress on Languages in Education, 1982.)

(Very recently, there seems to have been some increase in funded research activity, at least in relation to foreign languages. However, for reasons beyond the control of the L2 specialists, this increase is concentrated in a single area: that of assessment and certification. There are several ongoing projects at present concerned with the assessment of L2 communicative proficiency, funded in England by individual examinations boards, in Scotland by the SED (see for example Kilborn and others, 1984). This activity in relation to assessment is welcome as far as it goes. However, it cannot compensate for the lack of consistent research support in relation to other dimensions of L2 learning in education.)

For the purposes of this paper, 'language learning' will be taken to include both conscious and unconscious learning and acquisition processes; 'education' to mean formal schooling. A very wide range of research studies might be considered relevant to the 'improvement' of processes and outcomes of teaching and learning in the L2 classroom. The main part of this paper will, however, discuss British research and research needs, in relation to a few key elements in the classroom situation. These elements are: the L2 teacher; instructional strategies and teacher-pupil interaction; and the L2 learner.

'TEACHERS MAKE A DIFFERENCE'

In educational research generally, the importance of the teacher as a key agent in promoting learning has been re-emphasised in recent years (see e.g. Good and others, 1975; Rutter and others, 1979), though precisely what effective teaching consists in remains unclear (see review of relevant British research by Kyriacou, 1983). Whether or not instruction 'makes a difference' as far as L2 learning is concerned has been a matter of debate elsewhere (see review by Long, 1982). This has never been a 'live' issue for foreign language teaching in Britain, however, as the classroom is the only setting in which languages such as French or German are regularly encountered by most British school-age children, and the teacher is the main or sole target-language speaker with whom they come in regular contact. Organised classroom instruction thus represents the only opportunity available to most young people for L2 learning, and the quality of that instruction is likely to be reflected fairly directly in levels of competence achieved. (For ESL or minority community language learning, the situation may of course be very different.)

Teacher talk

If we take seriously psycholinguistic theories which suggest that 'comprehensible input' is a key factor in L2 acquisition (Krashen, 1981, 1982), then the character of L2 talk by teachers is of the greatest interest. The 'teacher talk' of L2 classrooms has been studied elsewhere (e.g. Lightbown, 1983; Long, 1983). However, only a small beginning has been made so far to the detailed description of FL 'teacher talk' in British contexts (Mitchell, 1982, 1983, and 1985).

Teachers' FL proficiency

It is however known from several research studies that 'teacher talk' in L2, apart from 'syllabus speak', is most notable by its absence in many British FL classrooms (see next section). Most FL teachers in British schools are of course native speakers of English rather than of the target FL(s) they are teaching, and teachers' lack of personal oral fluency in the target language is sometimes suggested as a factor restricting FL use. However, the force of this explanation cannot be tested, in the absence of any studies of British teachers' proficiency in relevant FL registers. While investigation of teachers' target language competence would undoubtedly be a sensitive business, it would seem a useful preliminary to the development of any remedial action in pre- or in-service teacher education.

Teachers' views of learning and teaching

Another research area almost untouched in the British context con-

cerns teachers' understandings of L2 learning processes, and their beliefs about what constitutes effective instruction (cf Wagner, 1984). One Scottish survey of teachers committed to a 'communicative' approach to FL teaching suggested that teachers' willingness to adopt such an approach derived primarily from a concern to improve pupil motivation, through a commitment to communicative objectives which pupils and teachers perceived as relevant to presumed future needs (Mitchell, 1985). There was little indication that these teachers had accepted theories which stress unconscious acquisition as the primary process of L2 development (and consequently emphasise the provision of 'comprehensible input' as the main task of the L2 teacher). Instead they seemed to view conscious learning as primary. Many argued that analytic study of the 'rules' of the target language was central to the development of advanced, generative competence: many also argued that active correction of errors of form occurring in their pupils' FL output was an effective instructional procedure. Here is a case where teachers' accumulated 'craft knowledge' is in apparent contradiction with current L2 acquisition theory. Such 'craft knowledge' may itself be a source of useful hypotheses for empirical research investigation (Desforges and McNamara, 1979). In any case, advocates of innovation need to take it into account when proposing changes in classroom practice, however well-founded in psycholinguistic theory these may be.

Teacher expectations

Lastly, L2 teachers' expectations concerning their pupils also merit closer study. For example, the Scottish survey just referred to also suggested that some FL teachers still believe that a proportion of their pupils are not capable of developing any significant creative FL proficiency under current classroom conditions. The basis for this belief, and for differing expectations currently held regarding levels of communicative proficiency achievable more generally in classrooms, also merit investigation in any push to improve L2 learning in the education system.

CLASSROOM PROCESSES

Until recently, very little observational research had been conducted in British L2 classrooms. In the large-scale and influential evaluation study of French in the primary school, conducted by the National Foundation for Educational Research, observation of classroom processes played only a minor role compared with the collection of attitudinal and achievement data (Burstall and others, 1974). Galton's (1978) review of systematic observation studies in British educational research refers to only one L2 study (Wragg, 1970), and Long's (1980) review of systematic and ethnographic observational studies locates only two more British studies. Lately however, some additional systematic studies have been reported, including Parkinson and others (1981); Mitchell and others (1981); Sanderson (1982);

and Lees (1983). (Delamont's (1976) exploratory study - of Latin teaching! - seems to be the only ethnographic study from a British L2 classroom.)

The systematic studies we now have are all small in scale, and the theoretical bases for the selection of variables for study from the total universe of classroom events have not always been derived from language-specific learning theories. Wragg's pioneering study applied Flanders' interaction analysis system almost unaltered to the FL classroom; and much more recently, Parkinson and others (1982) used an analysis scheme relevant to Bloom's general theory of classroom 'mastery learning' (Bloom, 1976), rather than to any particular psycholinguistic theory. However, in spite of their limitations, the existing British classroom studies are rich in interest for anyone concerned to improve L2 learning in schools, if only as a source of hypotheses for further investigation.

Use of L1 and L2

For example: the FL classroom studies (and an indirect study by Partington, 1981) concur in recording the persistence of English alongside the target FL, as a medium of classroom communication in British schools. They also suggest a degree of functional differentiation between languages, with the L1 being preferred for functions such as the giving of dense new information, and the FL (where it is used at all consistently for communicative purposes) being used largely for personal or instrumental functions. This tendency to reserve at least some key classroom communicative functions for L1 must be a culture-specific, and not a universal, phenomenon; it seems largely absent from the world of English as a foreign language, for example. It is of course a potential constraint on the provision of 'comprehensible L2 input' for pupils, and more generally on their involvement in L2-medium interaction; the reasons for it would have to be thoroughly investigated were immersion programmes, for example, ever seriously to be proposed as a means of improving L2 learning in British schools.

Simplification and repair strategies

Current classroom studies have also reported considerable variation between teachers in their apparent capacity to sustain FL use in classroom communication even for selected functions over extended periods. Mitchell (1983 and 1985) has suggested that teachers capable of sustaining FL use are effective users of a range of simplification and communication strategies similar to those noted by other researchers in 'mother talk' and 'foreigner talk' (see for example Snow and Ferguson, eds, 1977; Faerch and Kasper, 1980). This issue merits fuller investigation, however, as does the question of how such conversational strategies are acquired; can they, for example, be taught to other teachers?

Production or reception?

Another finding of interest for acquisition theory is teachers' apparently strong commitment to immediate FL production by their pupils. Mitchell and others (1981) noted the rarity of purely receptive activities in beginners' classrooms, and suggested that teachers might be requiring continual FL production at least partly as a mechanism for behavioural control, and a reassurance that learners were 'on task'. If an extended period of largely receptive experience of L2 were felt on psycholinguistic grounds to be desirable, ways of generating and managing this in classrooms while sustaining pupil involvement and attention would need investigation.

The foregoing paragraphs outline a few starting points for further research on classroom learning, starting from existing descriptive accounts of L2 classroom processes. The fuller application of discourse analysis techniques in future descriptive studies is likely to generate many more insights.

THE LEARNER

The British classroom research so far discussed is focused very largely on the teacher and on his/her instructional strategies. The classroom behaviour of the learner, linguistic and non-linguistic, typically appears only indirectly. In several studies, pupil attitudes and/or achievement have been investigated so that they could be used as yardsticks to assess the effectiveness of particular curriculum innovations (Burstall and others, 1974; Buckby and others, 1981; Parkinson and others, 1982). However, studies taking learner factors as matters worth exploring in their own right have been unusual in Britain. (Ganguly and Ormerod (1981) provide an example of such an attitudinal study in an ESL context; the ongoing large-scale study of pupils learning French being conducted by the APU has the assembly of achievement data as its primary purpose (Assessment of Performance Unit, 1980).)

Pupils' views on learning

There is thus a great deal more to be learned about L2 learners in our schools. Firstly, what are their motivations for L2 learning, and what do they see as desirable outcomes? Many current FL syllabuses and courses in use in schools claim to be based on an analysis of 'learners' needs'; but it seems in many cases that no-one has asked the learner directly about his/her goals. Regarding the process of learning itself: just as teachers' craft knowledge deserves to be taken seriously, so do pupils' views about what constitutes effective instruction and productive classroom learning experience. As well as the exploration of learner opinions through non-observational techniques such as questionnaires and interviews, direct classroom observation centring on the learning rather than

the teacher, and 'introspection' studies of children's ongoing learning strategies, could make varied contributions to the improvement of classroom instruction.

Developmental studies

But perhaps the most productive vein of learner-centred studies, from an 'improvement' perspective, might be a new wave of process-product studies. Not the broad 'method comparisons' which on the whole proved so disappointingly ambiguous in the 1960s and early 1970s, but small-scale, intensive studies designed to explore various aspects of L2 acquisition theory in classroom settings. In such studies, the development of learners' L2 proficiency in its various aspects (sociolinguistic competence and conversational strategies as well as structural mastery) might be followed closely and described in detail (using recordings of everyday L2 use in the classroom as well as specially elicited language data), over relatively extended periods of time. Process data on dimensions of the learner's classroom environment hypothesised to be critical in influencing L2 learning would be collected simultaneously, as might 'introspective' data on learning strategies. (Broad models for such studies might be found in L1 acquisition and developmental research, such as the longitudinal Bristol study (Wells, 1981).)

Such studies could yield data of the greatest interest on issues such as the relative importance of conscious learning and unconscious acquisition in classroom contexts; the existence of 'natural' L2 acquisition orders (as opposed to syllabus-derived orders); the 'learnability' of conversational strategies for turntaking, repair etc; the effectiveness or otherwise of active correction strategies; the usefulness of extended, purely receptive learning experiences; and the use learners make of different types of 'grammar explanations' and rehearsal activities. If linked to conscious and fully documented attempts to implement a range of innovative strategies inspired by psycholinguistic theory, such as 'silent way' or immersion programmes, the interest of such detailed developmental studies in terms of the confirmation/disconfirmation of psycholinguistic hypotheses would of course be increased.

CONCLUSION

The scope of this paper has necessarily been restricted. Firstly I have concentrated mainly on FL learning; however, other branches of L2 learning in British schools, notably ESL and minority community language learning, have equally valid claims for more consistent research attention. (For example, empirical investigation of the 'threshold level' and 'developmental interdependence' hypotheses advanced by Cummins (1979) could potentially lead to better informed policy-making for the education of bilingual children.)

Secondly, I have dealt with only the most central elements in the L2 classroom: teachers, pupils, and the relations between them. The contribution research might make to the 'improvement' of other factors in the total classroom situation, in the light of current hypotheses about the nature of language and L2 learning, also merits consideration. Syllabus design, materials development, and organisational patterns of instruction could all benefit from empirical investigation, perhaps most fruitfully combining research and developmental activity in a range of 'action research' studies (Cameron-Jones, 1983). The empirical validity of functional-notional syllabuses, the classroom exploitation of 'authentic' L2 materials, and the integration of direct contacts with the L2 speech community into formal instruction, are examples of possible areas for such studies.

Lastly, the question of research methods has not been discussed in any detail. However it will be obvious from the foregoing that a wide range of research techniques, drawn from mainstream educational research as well as from linguistics and psycholinguistics, may be appropriate for L2 classroom research. Systematic and participant observation, discourse analysis, action research, investigations of attitudes, ideologies and achievement, developmental and evaluation studies, will all have a part to play in developing British research activity from its present low base, to a level which can provide significant, continuing support for the development of the L2 classroom as a high-quality learning environment.

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